

I am so proud, on Anne's behalf and on behalf of St John's and the whole church, to welcome Christopher Joseph Green and Nathaniel James Walkey to church this morning, with their families and godparents and well-wishers, as we celebrate their baptism. I am proud, and honored, and absolutely overjoyed. Those feelings are cut with sadness too, because this will be my last time preaching here at St John's for a little while. I think Anne's planning on preaching a farewell sermon next week, so I propose Paul McCartney's pattern: You say goodbye, and I'll say hello.

I was baptized at the age of about five months, so I don't remember it. In fact, I'd guess that many of us here are from Christian traditions, like the Episcopal Church, that practice infant baptism. So many of us are in that same position. Our baptism blends in with the rest of our infant experiences. In a way, it took place in a foreign country, in the land of unspeaking consciousness--that's what "infant" means, that you don't speak. So all the words of the adults around us are equally incomprehensible. When my parents handed me off to the pastor, he was just another strange man to me. In an infant's life there are a hundred discomforts a day: What's one more splash of water? A high-strung or tired baby might fuss at baptism; others handle it cool as a cucumber. And the next day, by most accounts, you couldn't tell any difference at all. They're still a baby.

The feelings and experiences of young children are intense, and real, and valid. But without words to put them into, without episodic memory to tie our

moments into stories, we might as well have been in a sensory deprivation tank. You float there, in the quiet and dark. Maybe things happen outside. Some water sprinkles on the outside wall. Inside, nothing. Whatever we went through then is lost to us.

Here's what I do remember from the years that followed. I remember church; and I remember prayer. The exact texture of the green pew covers at First Presbyterian in Evanston, Illinois. The hush in my father's voice as he prayed Compline over my bedside. The intense boredom of hearing mediocre preaching. The way those little cubes of communion bread went stale in your hand. The exhilaration of reading the psalms for the first time, and hearing my own voice alongside David's, and Jesus' voice alongside mine.

What makes my baptism real in my life today-- what makes it something I can renew-- is the story it began. I don't remember learning the Lord's Prayer; but I can still pray it. I don't remember my baptism; but I've seen dozens of others, and at almost every one, I've renewed my promise to be faithful to these new members of Christ's family.

As we welcome Christopher Joseph Green and Nathaniel James Walkey to the sacrament of baptism, we are setting them up to live a Christian life for as long as they can remember. They won't have in their memory a single moment of decision: Instead, they'll have hundreds. Their life will be shaped by the pattern of Jesus' own life. The choices and graces that shape them will be daily; even hourly; and often out of their control. And even if they remembered their

baptism, that would still be true. Some of us here today, I know, were baptized at an age of accountability, or even as adults. And either way, the story that brought you to the water was still bigger than your choices or your memory. Who we are becoming is always a mystery; but it is also making us who we are.

We retell that truth every time we gather as church. The foundation of the Christian life, as Jesus lays it out in this morning's gospel, is the life of corporate prayer. How does Jesus begin his prayer? "Our Father": One person alone can say those words, but any time one of us prays them, we already do it together. Before we could speak; before we could reason; before we could accept Jesus Christ as our personal Lord and Savior; already God looked at us and saw her beloved children. Even Jesus, whom we name in the baptismal covenant as God's only Son, says "Our": The point of Jesus' prayer is for all of us to join it.

Before any of us were praying, someone else already was. Perhaps it was the prayers of our parents or grandparents we joined in. Perhaps it was the first Christian gathering we sat with. Perhaps it was the prayers of Jesus himself that first inspired us to take up this prayer ourselves, or his mother Mary, or the prayers of the saints of the past, the famous and obscure, who marked out the path we follow. And before Jesus raised his voice in prayer; before Abraham was; the eternal life of the Triune God, which precedes and grounds all time and all prayer, was reaching out to form us in creation, and ready to beckon us all back in redemption. We welcome everyone to the communion circle here

because communion between God and humanity rests, first of all, on the offer God has made in Christ to everyone.

I first came to St John's as an intern, almost four years ago, because of our history of witness to that truth, that all people are the beloved children of God. That witness has made us especially ready to confront the spiritual evils of patriarchy and homophobia. I've sometimes said that my first challenge at St John's was figuring out who was related to whom: There were gay couples everywhere; most of the women in straight marriages had kept their birth names; and everyone had children! Without the crutch of a patriarch's name for every family, I had to actually get to know the people. And I'm so glad I have. You are all fabulous creatures, and I'm blessed to have been in your midst.

I've actually been here long enough to see St John's change a bit. The change is, for the most part, very encouraging. We have grown younger, I think-- not only through the birth and baptism of new members like those we welcome today, but also through the increasing visibility of young adults worshipping with us. We have remained open to change in how we worship: Not many White churches would devote memorial offerings to the purchase of African-American hymnals, as we did in 2008. Fewer still would commit to using them on a weekly basis, as we have done for the better part of two years. That choice is grounded in our history: Parishioners here often speak with pride of our nineteenth-century Black Madonna window, which makes visible our history as an abolitionist parish. Jamaica Plain is striking, not only for its old money--

which built this church, after all-- but for how its White Yankee elites have always harbored an equalizing impulse. St John's reflects that impulse in how we spend our money, organize our families, and choose our leaders.

The hardest question I see for St John's is how we not only reflect our neighborhood, but witness to it. Tom Ward once described Jamaica Plain to me as a neighborhood of hilltops and valleys: On the hilltops, Victorian mansions; in the valleys, the immigrants and the poor. We are a church on a hill. Our neighborhoods-- most of which are middle-class and liberal-- are our setting for witness. Many of us commute here, so this gets a little abstract, but think about the church's immediate surroundings. What has our witness been here, when it counted most? What did we say to the Dole family, whose house is across Roanoke Avenue, when they were making their fortune off of colonized Hawaiian labor? Or think about the city of Boston. What did we at St John's say about desegregation, thirty-odd years ago, as Boston tore itself apart anew over race? How did we respond to that defining moment of the city's history?

I actually don't know how either of those played out. Maybe our witness on those past occasions was exemplary. Maybe we preached the dignity of every human being to the Doles. Maybe we acted as peacemakers and anti-racists in the '70s. It wouldn't surprise me if we did: In my time at St John's, on marriage equality, our witness has been heroic. That's what drew me here, at first. When we are fighting for our own rights, and for those of our chosen neighbors, our voices count, not only in our neighborhoods, but throughout

Massachusetts and the whole Episcopal Church. I've said before that nobody has to come to St John's. There are a lot of churches in Boston, and also a lot of yoga studios and soccer games. Everyone who comes here has chosen to, often at great cost. That choice gives us a tremendously strong common identity. That's what makes our public witness so powerful.

Where does that sense of common identity come from? Everyone who comes here has a different story, so we'd all tell that story differently. But in the past four years, I've heard two common themes. I've heard that people feel at home here, that St John's is a place that feels friendly and loving. And I've heard people say they want to find community, to find communion, to find Jesus. You can't really separate those impulses. They have a lot more in common than not. You don't get the one without the other. But they have this difference: When I say "we", who's in that? When I say "we at St John's", that's a beautiful community, for which I am eternally grateful. When I say "we, the family of God"-- when I say, with Jesus, "Our Father"-- well, when we say that, and mean it, there's no telling what we might become.

As we gather at the font, to baptize Christopher Joseph Green and Nathaniel James Walkey, there is no telling who they might become. The secret of their true selves is hidden in their infant bodies and souls, waiting for God's dream for them to be revealed. And we are all with them, whether we've been baptized for fifty years, or five, or never; whether we're lifetime members at St John's or here for the first time; whether we'll be here this time next month or not.

As we pray to God, "Your kingdom come," we ask for a mystery. But we do not do it alone. We do it together, as a family, with Jesus. And if you want to discover all God has for you this morning, I hope you'll join us at the font to renew our baptismal covenant, to remember our vows, to bring two of God's beloved children into our own family. If you want to join in God's joyous communion, I hope you'll come to the table. And if you do, I know that God will send you into the world, as God has always sent me, with a story to tell, a witness to bear, and a family to always come home to.

Alleluia! Amen.